DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 247 IR 054 747

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TITLE Community Needs Assessment for Public Library Services. A Working Paper of the Utah Public Library Institute for Training.
INSTITUTION Utah State Library Div., Salt Lake City. Dept. of Community and Economic Development.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Planning; Community Surveys; Evaluation Methods; Library Development; Library Planning; *Library Services; *Needs Assessment; Objectives; Policy Formation; Profiles; *Program Evaluation; *Public Libraries; Rural Areas; State Programs; Worksheets
IDENTIFIERS Library Policy; Small Libraries; *Strive Toward Excellence Program; *Utah

ABSTRACT

Part of the Striving for Excellence program of the Utah State Library requires participating public libraries to conduct community needs assessments. This is a way for library directors and trustees to find out if the mission they have chosen and the policies they have written are still appropriate as they identify the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. The assessment plans detailed in this booklet are designed for small and rural libraries. A first step is preparing a community profile, and a worksheet is provided for this purpose. Two possibilities for needs assessment are a forum to focus on needs and interests of community leadership and a needs assessment survey. However the information is collected, library trustees must then analyze the findings and prepare a library development plan, summarizing the goals and objectives from the previous year as well as those for the coming year, and establishing a 6-month plan toward achieving the assessment. An appendix contains a sample survey and a brief bibliography. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

A Working Paper of the

Utah Public Library Institute for Training

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COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

A Working Paper of the

Utah Public Library Institute for Training

UTAH STATE LIBRARY DIVISION

Department of Community and Economic Development

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August 1990

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COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE

The next phase of "Striving for Excellence" requires participating public libraries to conduct community needs assessments. So far, participating libraries have been asked to actively plan for library development by creating mission statements, writing goals and objectives, and by evaluating goals with performance measures. When a community needs assessment is added to the planning cycle, planning becomes more dynamic and meaningful.

A community needs assessment is a way for library directors and trustees to find out if the missions they have chosen and policies they have written are still appropriate, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the services and programs they offer, to identify which groups in the community should be targeted for new services and programs, and to move from goal setting based on operational needs to goal setting based on the library's mission or place within the community. If done well, a community needs assessment results in new understandings and insights into the community you serve. It can also be a means of reaching out to your community and publicizing the services and programs you provide.

The method and scope of one type of community needs assessment can vary widely from another kind and are not limited to the ones described for you here. The assessment plans outlined in this packet are ones we hope will be practical and appropriate for small and rural libraries. If you do not feel they are right for your library and its community, you are invited to design your own.

THE COMMUNITY PROFILE

Before you begin to design and implement your community needs assessment, it is wise to first put together a community profile. The community profile should give you an overview of your community and its most important features and characteristics (see "Community Profile worksheet"). Hopefully, the profile will identify the factors in the library's environment that affect the delivery of library services and will suggest what are your community's information needs.

Even long time residents of a locality who think they understand their community thoroughly are often surprised by what they learn from a community profile. The community profile ensures that those doing the community needs assessment start off with the same understandings. The profile can be useful in pointing out the direction the assessment needs to go and what will be feasible.

The information contained in the community profile can usually be gathered from other community organizations or agencies (town or county government, planning agencies, the chamber of commerce, the board of education) or from existing reference sources. Sandi Long can also provide you with comparative data for your library if you want it. The scope of the profile you gather can, of course, be unlimited. Generally, however, it is best not to spend time and energy collecting data you don't need. To make completing your community profile easier for you, the State Library Division is willing to provide a data packet from Donnelly Demographics for each library that requests one. These packets have thorough demographic data and should be sufficient.

After you have completed the community profile, you may want to look at the questions in "Analyzing the Findings: Discussion Questions for Trustees." These questions may help you decide whether the information in your community profile is adequate for assessing community needs or whether more is needed.

COMMUNITY PROFILE WORKSHEET

This worksheet is not exhaustive. There are many more questions you may need to ask. It is intended to provide a basic outline of the areas you should be looking at and to get you started.

Geography or Physical Characteristics of the Community

What is the area/size of the community your library serves?

Describe the distribution of population over that area:

Are there any topographical features that isolate potential users from services?

Population Characteristics of the Community (your legal service area)

What is the total population of the community you serve ?

Percentage of population under 5 yrs. of age:

Percentage of population 5 to 19 yrs. of age:

Percentage of population 19 to 65 yrs. of age:

Percentage of population over 65 yrs. of age:

Describe the ethnic make up of your community (percentages):

What is the number of households in your community:

Economic Characteristics of Your Community

Who are the major employers?

How do most people make a living? (break down into percentages for each major category of employment such as manufacturing, farming, mining, government, professional, self-employed, and so on) ?

What is the average household income?

What is the median household income?

What is the unemployment rate?

What percentage is below the poverty line?

How many working mothers are there with children under 6 ?

What is the assessed valuation per capita?

Educational Characteristics of Your Community

Percentage of population over 25 with 12 yrs. of school completed:
Percentage with 16 yrs. of school completed:

List the schools in your community - high schools, jr. highs or middle schools, elementary schools - and their approximate enrollments:

Describe the library/media facilities in the listed schools - are they adequate ?

Are there higher education institutions available (include extension services, Comnet, etc.) and how many people are enrolled ? What library services that they need are available to them ?

Cultural Characteristics of Your Community

Describe the cultural and recreational activities that are popular in your community:

List the cultural and recreational facilities available and the cultural and recreational organizations that are active (facilities include parks, pools, gyms, theatres, etc. and groups include clubs, societies, teams and so on):

What civic groups are active in your service area - what are their goals and interests and what services do they provide for residents ?

What are your community's means for public communication - newspaper, radio, cable message board, etc. ?

To understand the implications of the data and information you have gathered, refer to the section "Analyzing the Findings: Discussion Questions for Trustees". Although you cannot answer these questions completely at this point, they will at least give you an idea of the kinds of questions you should be asking as you interpret the data.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARIES: TWO POSSIBILITIES

Hopefully, once you have completed and discussed your "Community Profile", you are well on your way to completing the community needs assessment. Maybe you have some new insights into your community and its informational and program needs. Maybe you have gained some ideas for new projects or programs. Perhaps you have decided you need to make some changes, or reach out to a particular group, or develop some new relationships with other organizations. You probably have questions that need answers. All of this can be the basis for the rest of the community needs assessment. Outlined below are some possible strategies you may want to use to learn more and some possible circumstances under which each would be appropriate.

Community Leadership Focus/Forum

Circumstances: After reviewing the community profile, you think you have sound understanding of your town and are satisfied the library is on the right track, but you are disturbed by how few leaders of civic and cultural groups are library users. You wonder if the baseball coaches know about those new books on coaching and if the local businessmen are aware of your reference services. Your funding situation is fragile and you could use more support.

One of the advantage of living in a small community is that you can easily identify those in town who are most vocal, active, and influential. Also, you have the chance to invite those people into your library and meet with them face to face. This strategy requires careful preparation. You must be thorough and diplomatic in identifying those who are leaders. You must be sure they will attend and ready for them when they do.

The idea of the leadership focus/forum is simple. The people who are important in your community or to your service are invited in for a discussion (these can be elected officials or agency heads, leaders of civic and cultural groups, the newspaper editor, clergy, business leaders, school administrators and media personnel,etc.). Participants are told you are conducting a needs assessment in order to shape plans for the library's future. They have been identified as representatives or leaders and you want to understand their perceptions of the library and get their opinions about its future. Depending on the number of people who accept, you may want to hold more than one session. It may be difficult to conduct a discussion with more than a dozen people.

Arrange to have someone who is good at facilitating lead the discussion. It is probably best not to have the library director play this role as this may inhibit frank comments from the participants. For this reason, businesses that do focus group research usually hire an independent firm to conduct their focus groups. You may not be able to afford to hire someone else, but you may be able to persuade someone in your community to help who is a good facilitator but not directly connected to the library - for example, the mayor, the school principal, or a former board member. A current board member could also be a facilitator.

Trustees and staff members should be represented, but be careful not to outnumber or overwhelm your participants. You will probably want to have refreshments and make the atmosphere as cordial as possible (like an open house). Once your guests are assembled, you might begin with introductions and a brief tour of the library. Then have the participants settle into comfortable chairs arranged in a discussion format. You might want to have them fill out a questionnaire asking them about whether they use the library, why and how they use it, why they do not, whether they're aware of the programs and services you provide, and so on. If you chose to begin this way, don't wear them out - leave something for the discussion. (Questionnaires could also be filled out while they are waiting for the group to gather or before they ge there.) You may want to briefly describe the recent history of the library. Tell them about UPGRADE and the grants you have received. Explain what a community need assessment is and then ask for their input.

The facilitator should be prepared with questions and suggestions to stimulate discussion. The questions that appear in the "Analyzing the Findings: Discussion Questions for Trustees" section of this packet may also be useful in a forum/focus setting. The facilitator keeps the discussion on track and if responses are not clear, asks for elaboration. Participation is encouraged by being positive, not critical. Assign someone to take notes. Have a flip chart ready so ideas and responses can be written down. The discussion should not last for more than an hour. Write a summary soon after the meeting while your memories are fresh.

Advantages: Unlike the usual means of getting input, like surveys, this strategy is highly personal. It ensures that you will hear from those who count and may highlight issues that are of importance to those who are likely to shape public opinion. It can give key people the feeling that they have a stake in the future of the library. It can get people who haven't been to the library through the door and "break the ice." If done well, it can help you make new contacts and friends and be great PR for the library. Unlike a survey, it gives you the chance to "follow up" on the questions you ask. It is relatively simple and inexpensive.

Disadvantages: You may exclude leaders who should be included. You may exclude groups that have no leader. Not everyone is capable of conducting and balancing such a discussion. There is the chance that the discussion will suffer from personality conflicts among the participants or from hidden agendas. Because of the personal nature of this format, participants may be reluctant to be critical and frank.

A Library Needs Assessment Survey

Circumstances: Your community profile indicates that there are alot of nonusers out there. You have the feeling they're not aware of what you can offer them. You wonder why they don't come to the library and how you can get them to start.

Surveys are a traditional means of gathering information. Many libraries conduct "in-house" surveys periodically to hear from their patrons. These surveys are usually brief and focused so that they can be filled out by the patron during a visit. It may be useful to include such a survey in your overall assessment. For the purposes of a community needs assessment, however, it is probably most useful to hear from non-users as well.

There are a number of ways a survey can be conducted. While approaches differ, the format is similar - each asks an individual to report attitudes and behaviors in response to specific questions. They can be long and demanding or relatively painless. Regardless, questions must be written with care so that they are understood and don't elicit ambiguous responses. It is probably best to have short focused questions that do not require complicated responses. Don't ask for information if you are not sure it is relevant to your purpose. The reliability of the data you collect is dependent on how well structured and thought out your survey is. Before going public with your survey it is wise to try it out on a test group and get their reactions.

You can take your survey door to door. This means organizing volunteers (trustees and staff members are likely candidates - it could be a Boy Scout project). Make sure the areas you canvass are representative of the population you want to reach. Remember that your results reflect your sample. If you want to generalize from the data you collect and your community profile shows that your town is mostly lower middle class, it make no sense to just canvass the wealthiest neighborhood in town.

If you have the support of the local newspaper, you could conduct your survey through the paper. Explain the need for the survey and emphasize that you are particularly interested in hearing from non-users. Most people will not pay the postage to return a survey by mail so you must arrange for convenient drop off/collection points around the community. These must be well publicized and marked. Specify a deadline for return.

There are other ways of distributing surveys. See if your local government is willing to include them with water bills. The bank may agree to send them out with monthly notices. Schools may be willing to send them home.

Do not tally results until several days after the deadline for returning the survey as you will find responses continue to trickle in after the due date. The survey should include some information on the respondent so you can see how the characteristics of the respondents compares to the characteristics of the population as described in the community profile. This helps you know how representative your sample is.

Finally, you can hire someone to do your survey for you. Utah State University can provide this service for a fee that is affordable for most libraries. The typical price range for such a survey is between $100 and $200. Remember that you can use funds from your Public Library Development Grant for this purpose.

Advantages: Surveys are a traditional means of reaching beyond your own users to learn about the perceptions of non-users. If you can get a cross section of your community to respond, you get a broader view of community needs.

Disadvantages: Surveys can be difficult, costly and time consuming. If your sample is not broad or large enough, results can give you a skewed impression. It can be very difficult getting enough people to respond.

ANALYZING THE FINDINGS:
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TRUSTEES

Once all the information and data from your needs assessment has been compiled, you need to look at the implications of your needs assessment results for the future direction of your library. A list of questions follows that may help you.

How do the physical characteristics of your community affect the delivery of library services ? Are those services convenient to all potential users ? Does the library have the means to reach those who are far away ?

What does the population profile of your community tell you about its informational needs? (For example, are the mission roles you have chosen appropriate for the pop. you serve? What about your collection and programs ?)

What are the economic trends or prospects for your area - is the local economy growing, stagnant, or declining ?

What are the informational needs of the local economy ? Can they or should they be met by the library ?

Is your library getting the financial support it needs ? What are the possibilities for increasing that support ?

What is the level of cooperation between educational facilities and their libraries and the public library ?

What does the educational profile of your community tell you about the library's mission ? Collection ? Programs, policies, and facilities ?

Do students make demands on the library for materials, services, or special needs ? Are those demands met? Should they be met by the public library?

How is the cultural life of your community reflected in the library's mission, collection, and programs ?

What kind of relationships has the library developed with the cultural, recreational, and civic groups that are important in your area ? Are you aware of their activities, interests and needs ? Are they aware of the resources you can offer them ?

Overall, what does our needs assessment tell us about the library's mission ? Are the roles we have chosen for our library appropriate ? Do we need to add, modify, or delete any of those roles ?

What are the library's strengths ? Where are we weakest ?

Based on our needs assessment, is our collection adequate ? Do we need to change or improve the collection ? If so, how will we do this ? Does our collection development policy need to be modified ?

Do we need to change our circulation policy ? How ?

Are we reaching everyone in the community we can and should reach ? What groups of non-users could be targeted ? How will we reach them ?

Is the community aware of what we're doing ? How do they percieve us ? How can we make them more aware ?

Is the library getting the political and financial support it needs and deserves ? How can we build more support ?

In light of what we've learned, do existing programs need to be changed ? Are there programs we're not offering that are needed ?

Have we gained any insights into where our library needs to go next ? Ideally, what should our library and its services look like in five years ?

Now that we have identified some areas that need to be changed and improved, what are our priorities ? Are they realistic and how will we address them ?

How can we translate our priorities into goals ?

LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT PLAN
"Striving for Excelence"

This worksheet is provided for your convenience. A needs assessment should help you set your course, find worthwhile goals, and determine what your priorities should be. Hopefully, this format will help you understand the planning process and see the relationship between goals, objectives, and tasks.

Mission Statement

When making either short or long range plans, it is useful to review the library's mission statement since goals and plans should be consistent with the library's mission.

Summary and Evaluation of Goals and Objectives from the Previous Year

Did you accomplish the goals and objectives you set out to achieve last year ? How do you know ? Before setting new goals and objectives, it is important to review last years performance.

Goal # 1 -

Objective A. -

Objective B. -

Performance Measures -

Goal # 2 -

Objective A. -

Objective B. -

Performance Measures:

Goals and Objectives Worksheet for Next Year

Again, this worksheet is provided for your convenience. You may have more than two goals. You may find that some goals require more than the two objectives provided. Likewise, some objectives will require more than two tasks. Feel free to modify this format as you please.

Goals are general statements of good intent. A goal should be consistent with your mission and policies. Objectives break the goal into parts that are specific and measurable. Tasks tell how the objective will be achieved.

Example: Let's say your goal is to "slim down", a general statement of good intent. An appropriate objective for that goal could be "lose 20 pounds by March 1st." This statement is more specific. It is also measurable. If you want to evaluate whether you have accomplished this objective, you simply step onto the scale on the 1st of March and compare your weight then to your weight on the day you set the objective. To accomplish this objective you could design two tasks. Task no. 1 would be "stop eating between meals." Task no. 2 could be "walk one mile each day." These tasks tell you "how" you will reach your objective.

I. GOAL:
The Library Board and the director will begin work on a Community Needs Assessment of the legal service area. (You will not be able to complete the needs assessment before you turn in your development plan. However, you should at least be able to arrange for completion of the community profile section and to set a date for the board to discuss the results and set a plan.)

A. OBJECTIVE: Method of Evaluation:
Completion of the Community Profile. Using the "Community Profile Worksheet" as a guide, the data will be thorough and accurate.

1. Task: Task assigned to:
Collect data. Deadline:
Cost:

2. Task: Task assigned to: Library Bd.
Analyze data. Deadline:
Cost:

B. OBJECTIVE: Method of Evaluation:
Set plan for Needs Assessment.

1. Task: Task assigned to:
Deadline:
Cost:

2. Task: Task assigned to:
Deadline:
Cost:

II. GOAL:

A. OBJECTIVE: Method of Evaluation:

1. Task: Task assigned to:
Deadline:
Cost:

2. Task: Task assigned to:
Deadline:
Cost:

B. OBJECTIVE: Method of Evaluation:

1. Task: Task assigned to:
Deadline:
Cost:

2. Task: Task assigned to :
Deadline:
Cost:

Steps Towards Achieving the Community Needs Assessment: A Six Month Plan

(Please note: This is a suggested timetable. You may need longer.)

* Month # 1: The library director, board chair, or an assigned staff member or trustee completes the community profile.

* Month # 2: Using the community profile as a guide, the board decides what more they need to know about the community and the role of the library within the community and picks an appropriate method to learn more.

* Month #3: The library director and board design a plan for carrying out the rest of the needs assessment. The plan includes deadlines, specific assignments, and means for evaluating whether the plan is on track.

* Months 4 & 5: The needs assessment plan is implemented and results collected and summarized.

* Month # 6: The director and board decide what implications the results of the needs assessment have for the library's mission, policies, programs, and long range plans. Those new understandings are then translated into goals and objectives.

APPENDIX

(SAMPLE FORM)

M. Bushing
1986

COMMUNITY SURVEY

The "Anytown Public Library" is conducting this survey to evaluate library service and plan for the future. Your input would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

1. Do you know the location of the Library? YES NO

2. Have you ever used the Library? YES NO

   If no, why not? _____

3. Is there another library you use regularly? YES NO

   If yes, which library? _____

   Why? _____

4. When is the last time you used our Library?

   ____In the last week
   ____In the last month
   ____In the last three months
   ____In the last six months
   ____In the last year
   ____Never

5. Indicate the three most common reasons that you visit the library.

   ____Current events information
   ____Making or fixing something
   ____My work or job
   ____A hobby or personal interest
   ____School or class assignment
   ____Other (please specify)_____
   ____Sports or recreation
   ____Health information
   ____Government information
   ____To attend a program
   ____To bring children

6. How often do you find what you are looking for?

   ____Less than 50% of the time
   ____50-75% of the time
   ____More than 75% of the time

7. Which items have you used or checked out from the library?

   ____Paperback books
   ____Records
   ____Cassettes
   ____Films
   ____Pamphlets
   ____Equipment loan
   ____Magazines
   ____Newspapers
   ____Children's toys
   ____Maps
   ____Video cassettes
   ____Reference books

8. Which of these services have you used?

____Children's story hour
____Films or lectures
____Books from other libraries
____Referral to other agencies
____Bookmobile
____Adult tutoring
____Books by mail
____Information by phone

9. What two things would most likely increase your use or satisfaction with the library?

____Open more hours, specify which ones_____
____More help looking for books and materials
____More help answering questions
____More programs, specify what topics_____
____More copies of popular books
____More magazines, specify which ones_____
____More children's books
____More teenagers' books
____More newspapers, specify which ones_____

Please specify any subject areas in which you would like more books (i.e., health, hobbies, science fiction, etc.)

_____

_____

_____

10. What age group are you in?

____Under 12 years
____13 - 18 years
____19 - 39 years
____40 - 64 years
____65+ years

11. What sex are you? ____Male ____Female

12. Your occupation?

____Agricultural
____Business/Professional
____Federal or state government
____Local Government
____Homemaker
____Industry/Manufacturing
____Military
____Retail
____Retired
____Student
____Teacher
____Unemployed

13. What was your approximate household income last year?

____ $0 - $10,000
____$10,000 - $20,000
____$20,000 - $35,000
____$35,000 - $45,000
____$45,000 or more
____Don't know

14. Number of people in your household_____

15. Highest education level you have reached

____Less than high school
____High school graduate
____Some college
____College graduate

16. Number of library cardholders in your household_____

17. Have you lived in our community your whole life? YES NO

If not, how long have you lived here?

____40 years or more
____20 - 39 years
____10 - 19 years
____5 - 10 years
____Less than 5 years
____I do not live here

18. What part of town do you live in? (In a large town, this could be a list of zip codes for people to indicate. In a small town, it could be a small map and people could "X" the section where they live. You might want only a "rural" or "town" answer. If the library covers a large rural area you might want the choices to indicate a distance from town, i.e., under 5 miles, 5 - 10 miles, over 10 miles, etc.)

19. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for us?

_____

_____

_____

_____

THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME TO ANSWER THIS SURVEY

****

Remember that the above survey is just a sample. It is presented to help you formulate the questions to include in the community survey for your library. Edit the possible answers to fit the situation at your library. Only ask those questions which will provide you with information you can use to understand who uses the library and for what purposes, and who doesn't use the library and why. If you do not intend to use or even consider the information provided by a particular question, then do not ask it. For example, if you are not going to even consider the possibility of changing or increasing the hours that the library is open, then do not have the response "open more hours" as a possibility for question #9. There may be other questions which are important to ask in your situation. Perhaps an indication of the willingness of people to pay more money to support the library is important. Use this sample as a guide to help you design your survey. Add or subtract as appropriate.

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